

True to Ireland

Ireland's 'conscientious objectors' in New Zealand in WWII

Newsletter no 1 – October 2018

Many of you are aware that over the last few years I have been working on writing the book 'True to Ireland'. The purpose of this newsletter is to update you on progress and to tell you about plans for the future.

It is just over 10 years since this project began. It started when I was looking through my late mother's papers and discovered evidence that my father, Matthias Burke, had refused to fight for New Zealand, and by default Britain, in WWII. The seven pages that I found contained just on 2000 words. They have now grown into a 94,000 word manuscript, including appendices, glossary, bibliography, footnotes and biographies of the main individuals featured in the story.

After all the good research work by Geraldene O'Reilly, the special contribution from Fr Eamon Aylward in Dublin, and all the other contributions that so many of you have made, the first draft was completed on the 4th January this year. I set up a special room in my house to write the book and this has enabled me to focus just on that when I go in there.

'True to Ireland' has now been checked, peer reviewed and edited. Special thanks to Brad and Kathryn Patterson and Rory Sweetman for the peer review and Lynette Wharfe for doing the editing, which was beyond me for a whole range of reasons which have made 2018 a very challenging year.

I am delighted to announce that The Cuba Press – a boutique publisher in Wellington -has agreed to publish the book and it is currently going through an editing stage prior to final production. The aim is to produce a quality book with upwards of 80 images, both colour and black and white, spread throughout the book rather than in blocks in the middle of the book. It certainly will look attractive, and at a RRP of \$38 in New Zealand, is competitively priced.

The Cuba Press are also negotiating with an Irish publisher with a view to having it co-published in Ireland and I am confident that this will happen.

At this stage the aim is to launch the book in Wellington in mid-March and to follow this with other 'book events' in Otaki, Taranaki – probably Hawera, and Auckland. It is likely that there will also be an event in Dunedin. (I am open to ideas as to where else book events could be held - give me a call if you have suggestions.)

In terms of Ireland, the aim is to have the main launch in Moycullen, and other book events in Dublin and Mullinavat, and maybe other locations. There is no time set for the Irish launch and this depends entirely on the wishes of the Irish publishers. These, and the launch in NZ, are still in the planning stages and I will keep you posted as plans develop.

I am setting up a web site to promote the book and will also have a social media campaign and other promotional activities in conjunction with The Cuba Press.

A flyer about the book has been produced and I am distributing this at every opportunity.

Thanks to former rural broadcaster and talented musician and songwriter, Kevin Ikin, we now have a song about the book. Kevin kindly wrote this and he and his musician friends have made a fantastic recording which will enable us to produce an audio visual to play at the various events.

In late November I am presenting a paper at the Australian/NZ Irish History Conference in Sydney on the relationship between Peter Fraser and Eamon de Valera, which forms a key part of the book. This is also a great chance to publicise the book! I am also talking to local genealogy groups about the book and if any of you know of other possible opportunities to speak to such groups, please let me know.

It is great news that I have had the offer of support from the new Irish Ambassador to New Zealand, Peter Ryan, and many generous offers of help from others. Special thanks to all of you who have contributed to the making of this book - be it in terms of supplying content, photos, advice or just supporting and encouraging me to complete what has been a monumental task.



*The Cuba Press team –
Sarah, Roger, Mary and Paul*



*Mary McCallum and myself signing the
the contract to publish the book*



The flyer



The book room

So there is still a lot to do and details to sort out, but I plan to put out another newsletter in December and by then hopefully I can give you more information about the launches and other plans for 2019.

Writing this, my first book, has been a great experience and the learnings have been immense from day one. It started off as a project to document a piece of family history but it has grown into a much wider history book, although I have tried to not lose the family history flavour. For the last four years at least one day a week has been set aside for working on the book – looking again and again at the documents that Geraldene has sourced and buying and reading Irish and NZ history books. I probably have a library of about 200 relevant books, which I know is small by most historians standards, but big for me. The bookcases have spread into the hallway and beyond and my love of reading is greater than ever. I can say it has challenged me. I am used to writing stories of up to about 1500 words – 90,000 plus is a bit different, not to mention the presentations that I have given at universities in Dunedin, Adelaide and Dublin and at local genealogy societies. My golf and the farm have suffered and so have some friendships as I have worked obsessively on this project. I don't think I will stop here as I have plans for at least two more if I live long enough.

So there it is. I look forward to your feedback and again thanks for your help and friendship.

Cheers Pete.

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PS: Feel free to pass this newsletter and flyer on to friends, relatives etc as I don't have everyone's email.

If you have names I should add to the circulation list please send me an email.

PPS: Just in case you don't know the story – here is a brief resume

'True to Ireland' is about a large number of Irishmen who left their native Eire in the 1930s and came to New Zealand to seek a better life. But with WWII came the introduction of conscription. The men refused to betray Ireland and fight for New Zealand and, by default, Britain. The book documents their struggles with officials and some politicians and how 155 of them, including my father, faced deportation back to Ireland unless they fought. Eventually they won the right to stay and work in New Zealand and not wear a British uniform, which was a complete anathema to them.

The fact that the men were eventually allowed to stay in New Zealand owes much to the very special personal relationship that Labour Party wartime Prime Minister Peter Fraser developed with the Irish Prime Minister at the time, Eamon de Valera. Fraser formed a strong bond with the Irish Catholic community in Wellington and in 1942 made a special case to the British government to allow the Irishmen to stay in New Zealand, to which the UK government agreed. Fraser and de Valera met each other on four occasions – 1935, 1941 and twice in 1948.

This is an untold story and adds another dimension to the Irish New Zealand history. It also gives a unique insight into the political skills and acumen of Peter Fraser and his love of the Irish.